DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 113 979 FL 007 297

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TITLE Alienation as a Factor in the Learning of Foreign Languages.
PUB DATE Nov 75
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Washington, D.C., Nov. 27-30, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Classroom Participation; Educational Psychology; Educational Strategies; Language Instruction; Learning Characteristics; Psycholinguistics; *Psychological Needs; *Second Language Learning; Security; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; *Student Alienation; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Behavior; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

A student's self-image is his most precious possession. Yet this image is constantly threatened in a language class (or anywhere else). Some threats come from the foreignness of the language, others from the power imbalance between student and teacher, others from the student's failure to live up to what he expects of himself. All of these threats produce various kinds of defensive behavior, which interfere with the quality as well as with the quantity of learning. Teachers should try to run their courses in ways which will reduce these threats. A general strategy might include three elements: (1) trying to maximize student security; (2) arranging for students to study in ways that maximize their own self-investment in the enterprise; (3) allowing students, as much as possible, to learn from themselves and from one another, rather than directly from the teacher. These three elements are compatible with one another if the teacher concentrates on establishing and maintaining classroom routines and making necessary information available when needed, and if the teacher allows the students a large amount of responsibility for who says what to whom, and when. (Author)

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ED113979

ALIENATION AS A FACTOR IN THE LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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This paper is an attempt to condense into ten minutes some ideas that I have discussed with many groups of language teachers in recent months. The synthesis is my own, but I must achnowledge debts to Charles A. Curran and Ernest Becker. It is based on experiences as student, teacher and supervisor, but I have written it from the student's point of view.

As a student of a foreign language, I am first of all a human being. And as a human being, I am in a position that is not shared by the members of any other species: I see myself as the center of my own universe, but at the same time I know that every other human being also sees himself/herself in the same way. I know that I am unique, and I also know that someday I will die. I need to feel that I am "an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action," yet the value system that I have put together in order to give meaning to my actions is at least partly contradicted by the value systems of most or all of my fellows. I need to feel that I am good, and that I am whole, yet how can I, a finite being, be certain of my own goodness, or achieve wholeness?

And so my encounters with other people have contradictory effects on me. I cannot live--or at least I cannot be human--without others; yet at the same time their very otherness is a threat to me: under conditions of famine or crowding, they endanger me physically, but under any circumstances, the ways they live and the values that they hold are a potential denial of my own self-image. This is the pain of otherness. The Latin word for it is "alienation."

In my language class, I find the potential for experiencing alienation across at least four boundaries. The first is the boundary between the cultural group of which I am a member--the group that supports me in my self-concept as well as in my physical existence--and the group that speaks the other (the alien!) language. I find this kind of alienation more in my language class than in my other classes, and more than in most of my encounters outside of school.

The remaining kinds of alienation are as common outside of the language class as they are inside it. The second boundary is that which separates me as an ignorant, powerless and evaluated learner from the all-knowing, powerful and evaluating teacher.

The third boundary is between me and my fellow students. They compete with me for the attention and approval of the all-knowing, powerful evaluator. In addition, however, I also want their attention and approval, socially as well as cognitively. Trying to please both them and the teacher sometimes produces conflicts within me.

The final kind of alienation is between me and myself: between the performing me and the critical me who is observing the performance; between the me who is striving to be adequate, and the me who has internalized other people's ideas of what adequacy is. This is the deepest and the most stubborn kind of alienation. All of these four kinds of alienation carry with them the threat of considerable pain.

Therefore in any of my encounters with other people--and my language class is no exception--I am vulnerable, and must protect myself. Some of the means that I employ for this purpose fall into the classical categories of "withdrawal" and "aggression." Withdrawal may take such forms as chronic lateness, or trying to avoid the teacher's eye. In being aggressive, I sometimes engage in antisocial behavior,

or I may slap my forehead with the heel of my hand when I make a mistake. A third type of defense is to study hard, come up with the right answers on the test, and get an A for the course. This last type is much less annoying to my teacher than the first two are, but it is only a little less detrimental to genuine learning. It has, for me, produced a kind of pseudo-mastery, which has evaporated soon after the final examination. And it has left me, in later contacts with ordinary speakers of the language, in the paranoid posture of expecting them to be more interested in how I am speaking than in what I am saying. I have therefore sometimes tried to avoid speaking to them at all.

These, then, are some of the insights which I believe my teachers might profit from in the field of personality theory. There remains time only to state a goal toward which these insights might direct my teachers, and to sketch the briefest outline of a general strategy for approaching that goal.

The goal would be to try to run their language courses in a way, or in ways, that would reduce the degree of alienation among teachers and students, make it less necessary for me to defend myself, and leave me with an increased feeling of wholeness and worth. Under those conditions, whatever natural ability I have would be more fully released for learning the language (or for any other task at hand). What general strategy might my teachers then follow?

I see three elements in this strategy. I believe that these elements flow from the theoretical sources that I have already listed. The first is that, other things being equal, I learn more and I learn it better when I feel relatively secure. The concept of "security" is of course multi-faceted and multilayered. The second element is that, other things being equal, and given at least some minimum amount of security, I learn better when what I am studying is some-

thing to which I can commit myself--or have already committed myself--in more than a narrowly cognitive way. Learner-generated materials would be an extreme example of the application of this principle. The areas and the levels of possible committment are too numerous to list here, but that very fact makes this element of the strategy all the more important. The third element is that, other things being equal, I learn better from myself than from anyone else, and that I learn better from those who are my peers in the power structure, than I do from those who are above me in it.

But can I expect my teachers to apply all of these elements at the same time, or must they settle for some kind of trade-off among them? Specificially, how can we learners feel "secure" when we are learning from materials that are at least partially the result of our own choices, and when we are learning from ourselves and from one another? Won't we, under those conditions, find ourselves floundering, pooling our ignorance, and reinforcing our own mistakes? Won't this make us insecure?

I believe that the three elements work against one another only if control by the teacher excludes initiative from the learners, and vice versa. What do I mean by "control" and "initiative"? Under "control" I include two functions: first, the establishment and maintenance of rules for classroom behavior, including both deportment and learning procedures. Second, "control" in a language class means making it possible for me as a learner to find out how what I do compares with the language behavior of native speakers. By "initiative" I mean choice of who is going to say what, to whom, and when.

In the sense in which I have defined these terms, "control" by the teacher and "initiative" from the learners do not necessarily work against one another. I say this because I have myself been in

classes where 95% control by the teacher and/or the textbook has been combined with 95% initiative on the part of the students. Though the actual methods used in these classes have varied widely, the results have been quantitatively and qualitatively far superior to what the same teachers and comparable students have achieved under other conditions. Teacher control has apparently produced the security, and student initiative has permitted the involvement and the self-teaching, that our three principles have called for. Reduction of alienation has brought a lowering of barriers, which in turn has opened the way for a fuller, deeper kind of learning.